

Interview  
with  
HELEN FISHER FRYE

January 6, 1999

by Betsy Brinson, Ph.D.

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Kentucky Oral History Commission  
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This is an unrehearsed interview with Helen Fisher Frye conducted on January 6, 1999, at Mrs. Frye's home in Danville, Kentucky. The interviewer is Betsy Brinson.

Betsy Brinson: Do I call you Mrs. Frye? Okay. Why don't we begin, if you would, by just telling me a little about your growing up, when you were born, where you grew up, your family, any brothers and sisters that you have.

Helen Fisher Frye: I'm a native of Danville. I was born on Lebanon Road, lived there with my family until I moved to this house, so I've moved only one time in my life. My parents were Lydia Moran Fisher and George Fisher. There were nine children, four girls and two boys. Today there are only three of the nine living; six of them and my parents are all deceased. My father was a railroader, which was the best job available for African Americans at that time, and my mother stayed at home with the children and took in home laundry.

BB: Did your father travel a lot with the railroad?

Frye: With the railroad? No, no. Danville was a hub or center for the Southern Railroad, and they had what was known then, maybe still now where there are railroads, as a roundhouse. It was a hub for repairs on Southern Railway trains. He remained in Danville and we didn't live too far from the point of his job. I attended school at Bate School, which was a 12-grade, African American school. I lived on Lebanon Road, which is toward the west. Bate School is on the eastern end of Danville. I had to walk about a mile and a half one way each morning and back each afternoon and was fortunate if there were a school activity--I didn't mind the extra three miles if my parents would allow me to go to whatever basketball game or whatever. So there have been many times I've walked the six miles per day for school.

BB: Did you tell me what year you were born?

Frye: I was born June the 24th, 1918. I'm 80 years old.

BB: Okay. Thank you.

Frye: I had a twin brother. My mother was a twin; she had brothers who were twins. There were two sets of twins in her family. My mother had one set; then she had a sister who had two sets so there were twins--seem to character her life.

BB: What happened to your twin brother?

Frye: He died when he was fifty years old--he was a mortician. He never was strong and

healthy. The entire family pampered him and babied him, and we didn't want anything to happen to him. He was born with a hernia. I never read much--I know what a hernia is, but his was of a nature that he didn't walk much until he was three. They wouldn't operate on him, and then they gave my parents one in a hundred chance that he would live. But he survived . . .

BB: To age fifty. Did you look like him? Were you identical twins?

Frye: No, no. We were fraternal. The one brother whom I have yet living--my husband often tells me, "You and your brother Frank should have been twins, not you and Matthew," because we have the same philosophy, we speak the same language, we live the same lifestyle. We're more alike than I was like my twin brother. But he was a mortician which is a real good--not a profession--but endeavor. He, of course, worked winter and summer and the year that he died, 19 and 68. As I said, we were born in 19 and 18 on the end of the World War I and that was supposed to have been a terrible--not only from the standpoint of the flu epidemic but weatherwise I understand. At that time, 19 and 68 when he died, in February it was supposed to have been the second largest snow to the one in 19 and 18. And he had worked carrying caskets when they couldn't find anyone who would volunteer and be pallbearers, just worked himself to death. He lived here with my husband and me. He had been married but his marriage fell apart. He came home and--I don't know, about three o'clock in the morning. I woke up and I told my husband that Matthew hadn't come in. So I called the funeral home; he wasn't there. I said, "Well, if I can get out of here, I'm going and see," and I went down and opened the garage doors. He had gotten home--you probably don't want all this, but it's so much a part of me.

BB: I'm sure.

Frye: He'd gotten out of his car and started in the house then had a massive heart attack and collapsed and died right there. The coroner . . .

BB: Go ahead. I'm sure that was very difficult.

Frye: Oh, oh, oh, indeed it was. As I said, that was the second heaviest snow. Of course, we had had the snow cleared from the sidewalk, but it had piled up and the people who happened to pass were walking in the street. They couldn't see over the pile to see that he had fallen there.

BB: Go back to your education and talk with me a little bit about that. Did you go to the

Bate School?

Frye: I went to the Bate School twelve years. Graduated.

BB: Then what, when you graduated?

Frye: When I graduated from Bate School I went to Kentucky State College, received a bachelor's degree. I started out for a major in English, which I wanted badly, but I also wanted to remain at home and teach in the local school. My reasoning was that if I were to get in Bate School there was one English teacher, but there were about eight or ten elementary teachers. So I changed my major over to elementary education. After I graduated, there was not an opening in Bate School. I taught in three county schools, surrounding counties, one each year until an opening occurred in the Danville system, and I began teaching sixth grade in Danville.

BB: And that was approximately when that you began to teach?

Frye: I finished high school in 1938, finished college May the 19th, 1942, started teaching July the 5th, 1942, in Casey County. Rural, rural, rural, I had to walk the creek and everything. But I taught there only one year, and then I came to Boyle County where there was an opening and taught one year. Each year was a little improvement over the previous year.

BB: But you wanted to come back to Danville?

Frye: I wanted to come back to Danville. I was awaiting my opportunity.

BB: Why was that? Why did you feel so strongly about coming back to Danville?

Frye: First, I was in a happy home, a contented and happy, happy family. Of course, I hadn't traveled many places to compare, and since I've been grown I've traveled quite a bit. I haven't found any place that I still would prefer over Danville. So I wanted to come back.

BB: Okay. Growing up in the segregated South, can you recall any early incident where you felt that you were being treated differently because of your color?

Frye: I'm from a Christian home and the philosophy was that you're being mistreated now but you go to school, get your education, and the day will come that there will be opportunities and you'll be ready for them. This is the social climate and environment that it is, as it is today then when I was living; and you can't change it so try to live harmoniously through it. My mother was a person of great hope that it would not always be like that. In walking this mile and a half from our home to Bate School, we had to pass the white high school. In doing so,

there were two or three, maybe half a dozen, white fellows who would make *sure* we didn't walk on the sidewalk if they were out there. They would--of course, instead of trying to push back, we just got off and let them have it cause we knew we couldn't come out winners. We were going to be the losers so that's the worst personal discrimination, I think. Of course, public facilities, restaurants, the theater. You could go upstairs, but not on the first floor downstairs. We just accepted that. That was the status and we accepted--we lived with it and so that didn't bother us. I still feel, and I was taught well enough to feel the same way as I was young and growing up, that people who mistreat other people have problems themselves. Contented, happy people don't create problems for other people. So whenever I was in school teaching, I'd say, "If someone mistreats you, the person who does the mistreating is the one who has the problem. You don't have the problem. They have a problem, and they're taking it out on you." And I still feel that way about people.

BB: The school that you attended here, Bate School, how did it compare with the white school system?

Frye: We had good teachers, both at Bate School and at Kentucky State. I have attended some Big Ten colleges and I've never had to. My parents, thankfully, endowed me with a little gray matter [laughter] . .

BB: But your teachers were all AfricanAmerican teachers at Bate School ?

Frye: Right and at Kentucky State College, too. They were all African American.

BB: How would you compare though the conditions of the school, and the materials, and supplies, and the building?

Frye: Well, at that time I had no way of comparing because we were in our school, they were in their school and I didn't know what they had. Only the administration knew what we did not have and as I was exposed to the outside world and education and read and learned and heard, I felt that we had--of course, everyone was buying his own books at that time. African Americans as well as whites were buying their own books, so our parents bought our books. Whatever other supplies were given to them, we didn't know about them. So we had the same textbooks, we bought ours and they bought theirs. When the state began giving free textbooks, now that's the one point of some discrimination. Some of the used books from the white schools

were brought over to us but not entirely. We would receive boxes of new books in the various areas. And the teachers' salaries were not equal. I knew very little about that as a student, but as the years went by and finally we had a principal who came in and challenged it. Of course, salaries are still under local control and--except from the minimum foundation and then each system can build on that.

BB: When you were growing up here in Danville, how large was the African-American community?

Frye: I don't know whether I can answer that or not.

BB: Maybe not a number so much but was there a good-size community that you were a part of?

Frye: Well, Danville was a community, and we often say that many places that you go you can ask where the African Americans live. They've always lived all over Danville. Now there were certain concentrated areas. I lived in a concentrated area, Lebanon Road. My mother had lived on Main Street when she was a child, and there have always been African Americans all over Danville. Right now there are few areas where there aren't one or two or some African Americans living.

BB: Is Danville today an integrated community in terms of housing and neighborhoods?

Frye: Yes. Danville, back in July I think it was, *Time* magazine named Danville one of the ten best places for retirement, and we do reap benefits from that. It was based on many, many things--the education, the influence of Centre College. Race relations were one of the items that they used for the judging. Relations are very good.

BB: When you were growing up, and also when you started teaching, both outside and back here in Danville, were there people who were beginning to influence you and the way you thought about race relations?

Frye: My basic beliefs came from home and church. There were a few--and I have always had good white friends. When I was in graduate school somehow or another, those who selected me as friends and associates were generally always white persons. I've been president of the local teachers association. I'm the only African American who has been president. I've been president of the retired teachers, the only African American. And I was always nominated

by a white person. I don't think race; I don't see race. Sometimes I say I've been mistreated more by some of my own people than by white persons. After about five or six years, I began graduate work.

BB: Where did you do that?

Frye: I received a master's degree from Indiana University. I qualified for school administration from Ohio State, and I received a master's degree from the University of Kentucky.

BB: Okay. Your last degree was from the University of Kentucky? And that was when? Approximately.

Frye: I think that was about 19 and 60. I'm poor on years.

BB: That's okay.

Frye: But it was around 19 and 60. And I was the first African American to matriculate at Centre College. Now Centre College had had native African students to come here from Africa, but they had not admitted a native African American. And I was the first one.

BB: That was about when? Do you remember?

Frye: That was . . . I guess it was in the sixties. I guess.

BB: Okay. Would you say that Danville as a community is more liberal than some places that you can think of as a town or more conservative or how would you evaluate the community, particularly in the way they would think about race relations?

Frye: You know, I often compare Danville with Harrodsburg in race relations. Now here in Danville if a white person is friendly with you that person will come to your house, invite you to his house, her house, and socialize with you. In Harrodsburg, I get the impression--which is ten miles away--that the whites will give the African Americans, and the servants, and those who work for them more than the ones in Danville will give, I think, money, will them so much and see that there homes are--but to associate with them, have a cup of tea, sit down, no, no, no, no, no, no.

BB: Okay.

Frye: Here in Danville--oh, I could name incident after incident where different groups and different individuals have associated very closely race-wise. One of my first friends was a

lady by the name of Mrs. Van Winkle and a Mrs. Oldham and a Mrs. Erskine. They were three friends--of course, they were church workers. They worked with the United Church Women. I met them through a meeting that was sponsored by the Centenary white Methodist Church. All except the Baptist, and I'm a Baptist, but the other denominations have done more for race relations than the Baptists in Danville have done. They have an outreach to the minorities more so than the Baptists have. I can remember a time--I was very small and my mother, as part of the missionary group in our Baptist church, went to a missionary meeting, tea or something at the leading white Baptist church. There are two main white Baptist churches. And when they took them in as their guests, they put the whites on one side of the aisle and the African Americans on the other side, and served them cookies and tea or something. But they were still separated, segregated, there was no warmth, no fellowship, no anything.

BB: And was that the law at the time, that facilities should be segregated?

Frye: Well, there was never a law that churches had to be.

BB: Okay.

Frye: That law did not reach into the churches.

BB: Tell me the name of your church.

Frye: My church is First Baptist Church. It's at the corner of Second and Walnut Street. It was organized out of a Lexington Avenue Baptist Church, which is about one block from here, and then there was the First Baptist Church. They call it First Baptist or they call it Broadway Baptist. I can remember in 1945 our church was observing its one hundredth anniversary and just as ( ) I happened to be there because this meeting was going on. A delegation from the white Baptist church, I guess deacons, came to our church wanting to ask our church to change their name from First Baptist to Walnut Street Baptist, just get that First Baptist off. Of course, our members absolutely refused. We just told them if they wanted to change, they could change. We weren't changing. Or if they wanted us to put First Negro Baptist--we didn't have the word African American then--but we refused to do that. There are times now they call themselves First Baptist, and there are times they call themselves Broadway Baptist.

BB: Let me go back a little because we talked about how your growing up and how you approached race relations. But you obviously changed your thinking, your attitudes along the

way for you to eventually become the president of the local NAACP. I want to talk about that. but I'm wondering what influenced you in moving to take a more, if I can call it, an "advocate" role in trying to eliminate segregation?

Frye: I don't feel that it was a turnaround. I feel that it really was a fulfilling, an extension of the philosophy that I learned at home and from my mother --I live with this today. If, she told all of us, if you think you're right, go ahead. Don't back off. If you think you're right, you take your stand for right and stick with it. And so my becoming president of the NAACP was an extension of my home training and my Christian conviction.

BB: Talk a little bit about how you became involved in the NAACP. And what period was that for you?

Frye: Well, back again to my childhood, whenever there was a drive--of course, then there was a Red Cross and March of Dimes and you-name-it drives. Oh, when we were ten, twelve, we were selected to canvas our neighborhood and solicit funds for this different drive and so forth. And that continued. I can think of very few committees in Danville that I have not been on: family, service, Salvation Army. I was chairman of the Public Housing Commission. You name it, I've been on it. And that is an extension of my philosophy really, service. The bottom line is service. I think maybe that there is a common misunderstanding of the NAACP. The NAACP is not a militant group, never has been. I'm not a militant person. I'm an aggressive person, but I'm not a militant person. I'm ready to run from militancy--I'm chicken. But aggression and taking a positive stand for my convictions, I can confront anyone. I remember at one time I was on a commission from the city of Danville--I think that had to have been a federal program. Cities of First--First Cities. It was announced in the paper that there would be a meeting to get involved in this program. If I see it in the paper, and I often tell our young people today--I had a young lady say, "Miss Fish---Miss Frye, how do you get into everything? Everything that comes along, you're in it. How do you get in it?" I said, "Well, if I read it in the paper--the paper is out there for the public and I'm part of the public. If it interests me, I go to the meeting and see what it's all about." So they don't select me, I select causes. So that's how I got involved in the NAACP, that was certainly during the fifties and sixties. After the war and the service men had come back home, and they felt more keenly the discriminations, the

suffering they had undergone in the war overseas, and then come back home and not have full citizenship and so forth. My Christian conviction told me that was wrong and I should do what I could on the home front to change. So that's how I got involved in the NAACP. There was a minister in the Methodist Church, a Reverend Hodrich was the first one to my knowledge to organize a NAACP chapter here in Danville. My twin brother--we were quite similar as a family--we were, we would challenge a cause if we thought it was wrong. We would stand up and speak up. He was secretary of the, to my knowledge, the first chapter of the NAACP. After a period of years, it died down. Now this, of course, was before World War II.

BB: By died down, do you mean the membership . . . ?

Frye: Yes, they became inactive.

BB: Okay.

Frye: They became inactive, and so then after the war was when I initiated the reorganization of it and . . .

BB: How did you do that? Tell me how you went about getting it re-organized.

Frye: Well, I started out by announcing in the church that we were going to have--I don't hear the word now. I don't know whether you ever heard it or not--mass meeting. Whosoever will, let them come. We were going to organize a NAACP chapter. There was a need for it in Danville, and we announced that in all the churches. We set the date and had the meeting, and there was much support for the idea.

BB: And where did you meet?

Frye: I would say in the Baptist Church. That's where I belong and that's where the mass, large number of African Americans belong. That was the organizational meeting, but our regular meetings alternated back and forth from the Methodist Church to the Baptist Church. We had quite a few outstanding speakers during that period of time while I was president. We had Martin Luther King's brother here, we had one of the vice presidents of the national organization. That person's last name was Brown. That's been years ago. I've forgotten his name. But we worked with Centre College and this individual from the staff of the national NAACP. We made arrangements and this person spoke to a number of classes on the Centre College campus and, of course, that brought the races together.

BB: You became president when?

Frye: When it first reorganized.

BB: This was in the fifties?

Frye: I would say.

BB: Okay. And then how long were you president?

Frye: That would have been the late fifties. I was president up until 19 and 68. I do remember that because they were doing well, people were making progress and interest was dwindling. Yeah. We were getting what we wanted--some of it--and so interest was dwindling. You had to work hard for memberships, to get them to give you their membership. At that time, my mother had had a stroke and was sick and in the hospital. And, of course, I did most--I'm a worker. If I ask you to do something, I'm going to do it first. And so in soliciting those memberships, we just didn't get the support. And my mother was my idol. I idolized her so I gave all my time to her, and I told them I could not at that time serve.

BB: And that was 1968?

Frye: '68, uh hmm.

BB: Of course, your brother died that year, too, didn't he? Your twin brother, didn't you say that he died in 1968?

Frye: '68? Wait a minute, I have my years wrong. I told you I'm not good at years.

BB: Okay.

Frye: My mother did die in '68. She died just a few days different from Martin Luther King. That was in '68. My brother died in '78.

BB: Okay.

Frye: It was '78, ten years later. Thank you for correcting me on that.

BB: Well, you recruited new members, you had educational programs. Did you have any other kinds of activities? Did you write letters?

Frye: Well, we had committees. Committee on Education, I remember, and Public Facilities. Other committees. Among the things that I feel that we accomplished while I was president, Danville --back at the turn of the century, maybe late 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s--had had African Americans on the city council. Somewhere along the line--and I'm just

guesstimating--maybe in the 19 and 20s, I don't know whether it was a matter of no one running for the council or what happened, but from the 1920s until the 19 and 50s or 60s, we had no African American on the city council. So one of the things the NAACP accomplished while I was president, we spearheaded a campaign for an African American. And we got the first African American in forty or fifty years on the city council, and that has continued through till today.

BB: Do you remember who that first member was?

Frye: Yes, his name was George Harlan. He had come to Danville from Detroit, and he impressed everyone so they were willing to vote for him. We put on a well-organized campaign and got him on the council. Through the Kentucky Civil Rights Commission and Galen Martin--do you know Galen Martin?

BB: No, I've talked to him on the phone.

Frye: He is my friend [laughing]. He was one of those who encouraged me . . .

BB: Let me stop. You mean--Galen's group is the Kentucky Human Rights Commission, right? Okay. You said "civil rights" and I just wanted to make sure it was the same . . .

Frye: Yes, I'm using those two words synonymously.

BB: That's fine. Go ahead.

Frye: I will use the word council and commission synonymously when they really are not. But he encouraged me. The Presbyterian Church here in Danville has--in the past, they don't seem to be doing anything now, but back during the civil rights days really and truly, the ministerial alliance, association in Danville was made up of ministers of just about all the churches. Evidently these were young ministers who came out with a personal philosophy in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, and most of the churches had young ones, ministers that worked closely together. They worked for fellowship and human relations. At one point--and I'm overlapping but life is not separated and segregated. But starting from the little nucleus meeting from the Methodist Church back shortly after I got out of college, that's when human relations in an organized way started and developed, and went on from that meeting. I told you on the telephone about--I guess it was you, I talked with several different people.

BB: Tell me again so we have it on the tape.

Frye: That I went to a meeting--I think it was at Kentucky State College--and they were sponsored by the Methodist Church, I think it's called central district. I may be wrong on that. One of their main speakers was from United Nations headquarters. That made an impression on me. When I came back, we had a meeting and that meeting enlarged and enlarged and continued to grow and did a great deal for brotherhood here in Danville.

BB: I'm not sure I understand. Did the speaker from the United Nations influence you in your thinking in any way?

Frye: Yes, that things could be done. That there was a way.

BB: Let me go back to the NAACP because you said there was a committee on education. What were the issues that they were interested in during your tenure with them?

Frye: We didn't do much in the area of education except we did insist on more teachers in the schools. There was overcrowding.

BB: And the schools were still segregated at that point?

Frye: Still separate.

BB: Okay.

Frye: From this organization, we formed the Human Relations Council and that really was a city-wide, county-wide organization with ministers from all churches. We had one friend, Jim Lawless, who was minister of the Presbyterian Church. They said his congregation pressed him until he left Danville because of his human relations efforts. There were some others, too.

BB: So he was supportive of human relations, but his congregation didn't like that about him?

Frye: Correct.

BB: So he eventually left?

Frye: Jim and Lorraine Lawless were very strong. The Presbyterian Church had some good, strong human relations ministers. They organized youth groups and had youth fellowships between the churches and within the churches and so forth. So there have been many outstanding, productive efforts in human relations. It has not been overlooked. Some group or some agency, or some individual has always pressed for better human relations. One of the

things that we did--I mentioned-- getting someone on the council, but we also--and that's where I was when I was talking about the Human Relations Commission and Galen Martin. Working through them, we integrated public housing. There was a white project, and there was an African American project and the NAACP attacked that through the state Human Rights Commission.

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BB: How did you do that? Did you file a complaint with the state commission? Do you have to have someone who actually lives in the housing to file a complaint?

Frye: Well, we used probably more than one approach. There were persons who wanted to live in the vicinity of the white project--I don't know that we had any whites who wanted to move into the vicinity of the African American project or not--but those people had made requests that they would like a unit in the white project. Then, too, we did a little testing. We would send an African American to the housing headquarters and ask for a unit. Incidentally, we had volunteer services of white lawyers all the way through.

BB: Were they local lawyers?

Frye: Local lawyers, yes, who advised us and guided us. One of them I can name was--he just left the legislature, one of the most influential -- a man of integrity and just an ideal person--Joe Clarke! You know, in the state legislature he was considered the most outstanding, and then he came up admitting that he had an alcohol problem . . .

BB: He was from Danville?

Frye: He was from Danville. But he was then, and he still is a member of NAACP. He's a great individual. When he got ready to run for the legislature the first time, he came--and a lot of them have come to me because they know I will speak out. "Would you support me in my campaign?" One thing I remember I told him, "Put your picture in the paper and keep it in there. Don't let it come out. Keep Joe Clarke's picture in the paper." And he did that. I don't know how long he served, but he made an outstanding record. We had several other lawyers who advised us as we went along. We just didn't get out there, as my husband said, get out there with your hair flying back and don't know where you're going. We had a sense of direction and we went about it legally. We did not go about it in a militant manner.

BB: Okay. During the time that you were active with the NAACP and it was active also, how many members approximately do you think we're talking about here? How many people belonged to the NAACP?

Frye: During that time I suppose between seventy-five and a hundred members.

BB: Would you say that there were more men than women who joined or more women

than men?

Frye: More women than men.

BB: More women than men. When you divided up tasks of things that had to be done, what kind of tasks did the men take and what kind of tasks did the women take?

Frye: For instance, in discrimination cases, we had quite a few requests for support in problems. I know we had one man who was a known bootlegger and I taught him in school as a young person--and he came to me, "They're after me just because I'm black. And I want you to help me get my record clear and get the law out from badgering me." And I told him, I said, "If you're right, I will do anything in the world I can to help you; but if you're wrong, don't come to me." And, of course--I think he's in prison now, and it's all over alcohol. He was just a bootlegger.

BB: And he was a member of the NAACP?

Frye: No.

BB: He just came to you for help?

Frye: Most of those who came for help were not members. The members lived within the guidelines, and they had very few problems to contest. Let me see, I was trying to think of one other thing that we did, but those two were main ones: integration of public housing and getting the councilman in. I worked in church all my life from the time I was--I guess around ten or eleven years old I was made secretary of my children's department. I served in some office all the rest of my life, all the way to church treasurer and superintendent, you name it. But I was president of an organization called Men and Women's Auxiliary, and we brought Todd Duncan--I don't think you've ever heard the name Todd Duncan. Todd Duncan was a native Danvillian. He was the first African American on Broadway in New York. He played in the stage play, *Lost in the Stars*. This play centered in Africa and was about this African minister and his son. He was on Broadway, but, as I say, he was a native Danvillian. My mother said he was born here over on Walnut Street. He had attended Simmons University, which was an African American college in Louisville. Of course, he knew a lot of Danville people. My husband was there at Simmons when Todd Duncan was there. But for us, as a small group, to bring a Broadway star to Danville was something to be proud of. Up to that time, African

Americans had not been able to go to Centre College concerts. Of course, they bring in outstanding artists. The only way an African American could get into a Centre College concert was if he worked for some person who wasn't going and said, "You use my ticket." So if I use Miss So-and-So's ticket, I could go. So, when we got ready to have Todd Duncan, the only place we knew of that would accommodate our anticipated audience was to use Centre College facilities. The president, the secretary of this organization, and our minister went to see the president of Centre College to see if we could use their facilities for Todd Duncan. Well . . .

BB: Do you remember the president of Centre College? Do you remember his name?

Frye: I hope it will come to me, but, yes, I remember who it was . . .

BB: How did he receive you?

Frye: He was very open and receptive to the idea. He said, "Well, when you have it, will you have seats for white people?" I said, "No." [laughing] And my members, my minister still teases me about it. I told him, "No, we will just have seats." And that's what we did. It turned out so--people from all around central Kentucky, even from Cincinnati, came down because a lot of former Danvillians were all around. Then a lot of them knew Todd Duncan, and then the fact that he was starring on Broadway and a Kentuckian, we filled the house.

BB: Did he come to speak or did he . . .?

Frye: Sing. He was a tenor. He was a world famous tenor. He just died not, yes, a little over a year ago. I didn't know it but one of my foreign friends here in Danville called me and said, "Are you listening?" Said, "Lexington stations are playing Todd Duncan's music because he just died." And so the concert was a great success. It was on, I think, a Saturday night, Friday night or Saturday night, and on Monday morning the chairman of Centre College artists program, called me at school to come by his office that afternoon. I went by and he said, "We had a called meeting of our committee this morning, and we were so impressed with how you presented your concert that we have decided that we will open our concerts to African Negro, African American." And he said, "I'd like for you to head up the campaign to try to get African Americans." We succeeded, and we've been going ever since. I've had a season's ticket ever since and that was back in the fifties, the early fifties.

BB: The early fifties that you had Todd Duncan?

Frye: Todd Duncan here.

BB: Well, that was unusual for that period. Let me go back, when did you get married in all of this?

Frye: 1975. I was an old maid. Everybody said, "When are you going to marry? When are you going to get married?" The only thing I missed in not getting married earlier was I always hoped I would have twins. Of course, by 19 and 75 I was too old for anything [laughing].

BB: How did you meet your husband?

Frye: He is a native of Danville, but when he left Simmons, he went on to Chicago. His father was a physician here in Danville. My husband's father was a physician here in Danville. His mother had hoped that he would follow in his father's footsteps and be a physician. He didn't want to be a physician; he wanted to be a farmer. So his father was supporting him, and his mother was on the other side. The father and the mother both lost out because the father had taken option on forty acres for him because he wanted to be a farmer. He wanted to be a farmer. His mother said, "You're going to be a doctor." So his father came in and said, "Well, son, it looks like to me that if you don't go to medical school, either you're going to have to leave here or I'm going to have to leave here." [laughter] So when he finished Simmons--well, he didn't finish Simmons, he left and went to Chicago and went into the Chicago post office. He became a supervisor before he left. And when he retired--he had married there in Chicago, he had a son and a daughter. He has a daughter who is eight years my junior. She was a pediatrician; she retired. And the son followed his father's steps and was in the post office. His wife, their mother, passed, and he has a brother--there were two boys in my husband's family--and the brother had already moved back to Danville fifteen or twenty years earlier when he retired. He retired as soon as he had his term. He came right on and built a home here in Danville.

BB: Did you not know him until he came back?

Frye: I didn't know him.

BB: I see.

Frye: I had seen the brother when he would come to Danville to visit, but I had never seen him. He came home on a Memorial Day weekend, and the brother and his wife invited me out to dinner. That's how I met him. And our friendship lasted about five years, and then I

finally succumbed [laughing].

BB: You've been married about as long as I've been married.

Frye: Really? But you don't have the years behind you [laughing]. That makes a difference.

BB: Did the fact that you stayed single as long as you did give you opportunities to be more active in the community?

Frye: I realize and have often said, had I been married and had a family I could not have been as involved as I was because my husband tells me very often, "If you had had children," he said, "you would have been so close on them, they couldn't have breathed." I was considered a good teacher but a firm teacher. One of the incidents that helped bring me further into the public was--I mentioned three ladies, three white ladies, who were friendly with me. One of them named Mrs. Oldham--I had her come to my class or something, I don't even remember what it was--and at sixth grade level, I was teaching a little bit of different bits of work from different classes up on the board and one of them was budgeting. I was teaching sixth graders if you get fifty cents a week, you spend a dime to go to the show and three cents--you could get lunch for three cents at the cafeteria. And then I was teaching something about paragraphs in English, and she was so impressed with that that she had me come to one or two of her groups and so forth. That helped promote me. It didn't influence me because I was who I was, but it brought me before the public.

BB: Now, when she came were you still teaching in an all black school?

Frye: Yes.

BB: You were? Let's talk about your career and teaching. At what point do you remember going from an all black school to an integrated school in the system? What was that like here?

Frye: What? From the standpoint as a student . . . ?

BB: No, you as a teacher. When did the schools integrate in Danville and where were you within the system when that happened?

Frye: Schools were integrated in the 1960s, about 1965. It was done in phases, so many grades per year and so forth. The African American Bate School closed down totally, I think it

was 1964 or 1965 and that was when I entered the integrated school system. It didn't change my philosophy, didn't change my approach; it didn't change anything for me. Well, I had worked through this church group and through Girl Scouting--I was scoutmaster of two troops at the white church. I guess I can understand why they couldn't get anybody else to do it [laughing] cause those girls were problems. They couldn't find anybody in their church who would take it, so they brought this Negro woman in. I handled it for about two years but I also mentioned that that the Presbyterian Church had had activities. The Presbyterian Church had a teen canteen where they would dance and so forth and that was integrated. I was chair of our young people, so I had worked with white people, young and old, so it didn't change my thinking at all.

BB: When did you first become involved with the Girl Scouts? Were you a Girl Scout growing up?

Frye: [Laughing] I often tell people I was a Boy Scout, but I was never a Girl Scout. They had segregated troops. I don't think they even had white Girl Scouts in Danville early on. I had two brothers who worked with Boy Scouts, and very often we would go to their cookouts or, if they were at an encampment, some of us would get together and go for a night bonfire. And then if they would take hikes, they would let us go with them. I was a tomboy--I remember I was a tomboy--and so I followed them on their hikes and when the opportunity came to organize a troop among the African Americans, then I organized African American troops in our church.

BB: Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts?

Frye: Girl Scouts. Girl Scouts. And it was while I was with my own African American troops that I was asked to take over the troops in the white church.

BB: Do you recall approximately when the first African American troops were organized in Danville?

Frye: There had been a lady, she was a beautician, older lady than I was at the time, and she had Girl Scouts. But now what they did never really did come before the public. There was never a public presentation that I knew about, so my working with them was not the first effort toward scouting. I don't know . . .

BB: But do you think this was in the forties, the fifties . . .?

Frye: Yes, fifties and sixties, was not in the forties. In the fifties and sixties. Let me

see, there was one thing I wanted to mention, one little incident.

Frye: I just had both knees replaced in June.

BB: How are you doing?

Frye: Doing well.

BB: Good.

Frye: Oh, NAACP. I knew where state headquarters were in Louisville, and if I had a question, I would either call or go up there. I was a courageous person. It's a wonder I'm alive. [laughing] And all of their workers had x or y or z or something, the . . .

BB: What do you mean "x or y or z"?

Frye: Wait a minute, let me save my thoughts. Uh, FBI . . .

BB: FBI.

Frye: FBI--their work was rigid x or rigid y; that's all you got and their name. But anyway, one day I was at the A & P store which was across from city hall. I was going out to my car and one of the city councilmen was coming out of the police department. He hollered across the street over to the parking lot, "Miss Frye, the FBI is looking for you." Of course, you know, to be, have any contact with the FBI back then was said you had to be red and pink and communistic and everything else. I said, "Well, you tell him I'm on my way home. If he wants to see me, come on out to my house." [laughing]

BB: Did you ever hear from the FBI?

Frye: Oh, they stayed in contact with me.

BB: Oh, did they?

Frye: All while I was president of the NAACP. They were really double agents, the news reveals. They gave the African Americans the impression that they were backing them and supporting them and wasn't going to let anything happen. And if it did happen, they'd be on hand and if it got out of hand, they'd come in and enforce things. But, again, as we have learned, one of the biggest enemies that African Americans in the NAACP had was the FBI.

Frye: FBI and . . . What was his name? J. Edgar Hoover. He did more to hurt than to help, but he left us with the impression--and I know I told one of them once on the telephone--he asked me did we have, what activities did we have planned and did we have any marches planned

and so forth. I told him we did not have any plan, and I said, “You know, if I were planning something that was illegal or unacceptable, I would not talk about it on my telephone because I know you have my phone tapped. So if you get me, you’d have to get me some other way.” On the other hand, one of the biggest supporters I had throughout my public life was the local paper. They had a city editor named Miss Tipton, and Miss Tipton supported me in anything I did. At one time, when they were taking the freedom ride buses to the South, she called me and said that it was rumored around town that I was organizing a busload of freedom riders and was that a fact. I said, “No, I’m not.” And she said, “Well, if you are, just let us know, we want to give you some good positive publicity on it.” I said, “Well I certainly would.” Shoot, in her eyes I could do no wrong. And that was a big plus on my side to have the newspaper.

BB: Was there a bus going to the freedom rides from Danville?

Frye: No, no, no.

BB: Did anyone try to organize one?

Frye: Now, there were some college professors from Centre College who went down for the freedom rides and did voter registration. I knew three of them, and they worked with the NAACP here. Everything was open. I mean, we weren’t undercover. If the NAACP was going to meet, I told Miss Tipton and she put it in the paper. We did everything aboveboard and wide open. We weren’t hiding anything.

BB: When we talked on the phone, you told me a story about how there were some efforts here to open up public accommodations, lunch counters and whatnot. Would you tell me that story again? Apparently some of your students were involved.

Frye: Yes. I was teaching sixth grade but in church I worked with all ages. I think it was through the church that I got these young high school students, maybe from nine through twelve, grade, and we discussed the situation. To make it convenient, we said, “Well, we’ll get together after school at school.” And that’s what we did. We decided we would go to one of the drugstores to try to see if--nationwide they were having the sit-ins so we would go. Again, I talked with a lawyer and we got guidance from him. I had these young children to meet in my classroom after school and we worked out our strategy. I don’t know how many times they went but they were never served. They sat and they came out peacefully. No violence, no

confrontation or anything.

BB: They were never arrested?

Frye: No, no, no, no. The law was not called in or anything. They just let them sit there, and after so long they left. At school any time there was going to be a special convocation in the gymnasium, the principal would send his secretary from room to room, "Come to the gym, we're having a special program." And, so, we went to the gym. You know, men oftentimes are not as daring and brave as women. Here's a bit of philosophy--I had a hard time accepting it, but I finally understood it and that came from my principal. He said, "African American men are the biggest targets when it comes to integration. Number one, the white man hates the black man because the white man knows how they mistreated the black women. He's afraid if equality comes then the black man is going to do to the white woman the same thing. Turn the table. So, the black man is a target." I couldn't see that at first, but that is true. That is true. I accepted that.

BB: Let me ask how much of that philosophy do you think is also based on just the whole history of racial violence and lynching where more black men were objects of lynching and racial violence? Do you think that that plays a role into the development of that philosophy about why African American men thought that and could not be as daring?

Frye: I would think so, yes. The lynchings and lashings and whatever else. The black man was the recipient of all of that . . . violence, if you will. So nothing that the African American man could do was right except till the soil and tend the plantation. I read this just recently that one reason that *Beloved* did not succeed was that the white man has heard enough, that his conscience has been seared enough, he knows enough about what they did to the African Americans and they don't want to hear it anymore.

BB: When you say "the white man," are you including . . .

Frye: Women.

BB: . . . white women as well as white men?

Frye: Right, because even young white people, children, teenagers, they had as much authority in many instances over a slave as their parents had. In many instances, there were slave women who had children by a plantation owner and then turned around and had one by his son.

The woman was just the object of it. She had no recourse, no way out of it. She had children by the father, and children by the son, and they say the half has not been told.

BB: Which is another kind of violence to the black woman, but that's not one that's talked about, I guess. I took you off track there a minute. You were starting to tell me in all of this about why the principal reacted as . . .

Frye: . . . as he did. Well, it went back to he was afraid of his position in the school, that if these Bate School students were sitting in, then he's the one they would call in first to question about the sit-ins. So, he called one of the student's name, "Do you want your mother--Gleneva, do you want your mother to find you out there tied up to a tree all beat and . . . whelped and so forth?" Then he'd call another one and say, give another grisly picture. I think I told you on the phone, when it was all over, I stood up and told him I would not have them meet at the school anymore. I said, "I have a home on Lebanon Road and I can bring them out there; and as superintendent of the church, I have a key and we can meet there." But I said, "I will not stop." And I didn't stop. I don't know what all I did. [laughing]

BB: Did you move to another place to meet though? Did those meetings continue with the students?

Frye: Yes, yes.

BB: At the church, or your home, or . . .?

Frye: Both.

BB: Both.

Frye: Both. And we have a youth group in the NAACP. Really, I don't remember all the things. I just did whatever my conscience dictated to me was the right thing to do. I challenged whatever, in a harmonious manner, whatever I thought was wrong.

BB: You told me something about how he called an assembly at the school.

Frye: Yeah, that was the one.

BB: Tell me about that again. And what did he say in front of everybody about you?

Frye: Well, what I had just said about--he called a student's name, "Gleneva, do you want your mother to find you out somewhere whipped and beaten?" From sitting in these white restaurants and so forth, and another one, "Do you want to wake up and find your house on fire?"

I mean, he painted pictures that weren't happening in the South, some of them.

BB: And this was in front of the whole school?

Frye: The whole student body, the whole student body.

BB: Which is about how many people? How many students were there approximately in the school?

Frye: There were between I'd say four and five hundred students.

BB: And all of these students were present at the assembly?

Frye: Right.

BB: And did he say anything about you in that meeting?

Frye: No, no. He just talked about the activities, but everyone knew I was the one who was doing it. So, I just stood up and, without his referring to me personally, I just stood up and defended the action and the students.

BB: That was very brave of you. Were you nervous about doing that?

Frye: No, no. I felt I was right.

BB: You didn't fear for your job or . . . ?

Frye: I started to mention that a few minutes ago when I said, "I don't know how many things I did. If I thought something was right or something needed to be said . . ." Writing letters to the paper and the editor, oh, I just challenged everything . . . so I don't know what all I did.

BB: You said that women were more daring than men.

Frye: Uh hmm.

BB: Of the students who were involved in the sit-ins at the lunch counters, how did they break out in terms of male and female?

Frye: Mostly, mostly the girls. One thing, the boys who would have were in athletics and the small number of athletes who played one major sport played in all of them. The ones whom you would want to represent the cause were athletes, and so they were seldom available to go with them. About threatening my job, I had a few threats. I know once I went to a service station to get gasoline in my car and the attendant was putting gas in my car and a white lady came up. He left my car with the hose in my car and went to this white lady. I told him, "I'm ready to go." He said, "Well, I'll take care of you after while." And so with the hose in my car I

started moving, pulling off. I don't know what he said, but anyway, he told me I was going to get in trouble or I could cause damage or something. I told him, I said, "Well, you come and finish my car or else I'm going." So he came on, and he said, "I'm going to talk to the superintendent of schools about you. You're just too smarty aleck." I don't know what answer I gave him but that didn't stop me. A church in Louisville, the largest African American church in Louisville, we had their minister to come here to one of our NAACP meetings. I told him I had had several threats about my teaching and possibility of being released from school. He said, "Don't stop. They wouldn't dare, they wouldn't [chuckle], they wouldn't dare release you from school." Of course, that gave me more courage to go on and continue what I was doing. I [laughing]--my twin brother would say, "Listen, Helen, now if you want to stay with all of that, you just get on out of here, get on out of the house and get you some place cause we don't want to wake up one morning with this house on fire." And so forth. "If you want to keep that going,"--now he had been in the NAACP, but they weren't doing the kind of aggressive action that we were doing, so . . .

BB: So did you? Did you move out of the house?

Frye: No, I stayed there.

BB: So at that point, it was you and your brother, and did your mother live with you? How did she feel about your advocacy?

Frye: I lived at home. I never did leave home.

BB: How did she feel about your advocacy?

Frye: She encouraged me all the way. She's the biggest supporter I had. If you think it's right, do it. She was behind me all the way. Well, I guess my brother said that partly in jest, you know, but he just felt I was going a little too far. Just get out and don't threaten everybody in the house.

BB: What happened in 1968 with the death of Martin Luther King? How did the community handle that?

Frye: I think it was a feeling of frustration. We just didn't know. It was kind of like when Kennedy got killed, a feeling of frustration. What's going to happen now? Are we going to take to the streets or are we going to back out of the whole thing? I think there was more

frustration than anything. We had a memorial but that's all we did. We didn't do anything.

BB: You mean a memorial service?

Frye: Service, uh huh. At the church, the NAACP, the church, the community.

BB: Are there any records of civil rights activities that you know about from the Danville community, like newspaper stories, photos . . .?

Frye: Photos, not any that I would know of.

BB: Any of the NAACP members or officers?

Frye: No, no. Now that's one thing. A lot of the members did not want it publicized that they had membership in the NAACP. Now one person that we had, our reorganization treasurer was working at the state hospital out on Shakertown Road. I noticed that when I would call wanting to ask about money or a check, his wife would never let me speak with him. She would take the message, but I could never speak with him. Finally, he explained that since he was a state worker for the government, he was afraid that he would lose his job so he didn't want it known that he was working with the NAACP. Whenever his supervisor did learn that he was a member, the supervisor encouraged him, said, "Well, that's a respectable organization. You just keep your membership." Of course, you couldn't trust anybody; they might have encouraged him and then used it against him. But anyway, he finally gave up the position, but his job had not been threatened at all.

BB: Are you aware of anybody in Danville in the chapter who lost a job because of their involvement?

Frye: No, no.

BB: No. But people were nervous about it.

Frye: Uh hmm. But no, I don't know of anyone who suffered any retaliation at all. There were people who went to my superintendent, and my superintendent didn't look favorably on me at all. The first time the organization wanted me for president, I don't know whether he told me or somebody else that he had something else that he wanted me to do. He didn't want me president at that time. He had something but that something else never did develop and come through. I guess he was kind of like my principal.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BB: Did you postpone your presidency at all because he said he had something else for you to do?

Frye: Presidency of the Danville NAACP?

BB: So did you postpone your presidency because the superintendent said there was something else he wanted you to do?

Frye: I don't know how we got around that. I did accept but somehow or another he worked it out that the body elected someone else at that time. But before he left I was president of the organization.

BB: Was it unusual for a woman to be president of the NAACP?

Frye: No, no, no. The Danville Education Association had had women in the past so that was not unusual.

BB: But of the NAACP? Was that unusual to have a woman as president?

Frye: I don't--of course, we had had only one other president prior to that time; that was the Reverend Hodrich. But statewide and nationwide, no, women have always played major roles in NAACP work.

BB: Tell me about your involvement with the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

Frye: You know, I came across an article in the paper just since I've talked with you about the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the two organizations. Nothing that I really contributed counted. So I was a member, and that was all because the national association and the Kentucky Association of Colored Women's Clubs--they haven't done anything. I mean, now, as I was growing up it was a very important organization in the life of Negro women and they took actions--and for me to enumerate some of them, I would have difficulty, but the primary leaders were women from Lexington and Louisville. The organization did a great deal, but now it is nothing. Now that's the National Association of Colored Women's Club. I can't call the name of the other one to you . . .

BB: The National Council of Negro Women?

Frye: The National Council of Negro Women is a much more active. There was an

article in the paper with a picture, and I put it someplace to show it to you, of a recent meeting that they had. Now they are a much more progressive, aggressive contributing group of women.

BB: Right. Back though during the fifties and the sixties, were either of those groups involved in the effort to eliminate segregation in any way?

Frye: They made no outstanding contribution to my knowledge. They met but through the years whatever they did was done in a segregated manner. We will do this to help our young Negroes. But it was always in a segregated manner to my knowledge.

BB: Were you involved in any other women's organizations, like leagues or sorority?

Frye: I was a member of a national sorority while I was in college.

BB: Which one was that? Which sorority?

Frye: That was Alpha Kappa Alpha, AKAs. Of course, there were African American Greek organizations, and then there were your Caucasian Greek organizations. Most of them have integrated one way or the other now, but they were totally segregated at that time.

BB: But it was not a sorority that you continued any membership in after you left college?

Frye: No, and the primary reason--I really wanted to--but one had to join the local organization that was nearest in terms of mileage. Lexington was nearer to Danville than Frankfort, and I wanted to affiliate with the Frankfort chapter. I did not want to affiliate with the Lexington chapter, so I just didn't.

BB: Okay. You mentioned that you didn't travel much when you were young, but you've traveled a good bit since then. Where all have you been?

Frye: When you think of the world travel that people do now, it wasn't much. Well, before I retired, I was still teaching and I went with a group from Louisville, I think, to the Seattle World's Fair. I think that was the first trip I took. And then I went with a Lexington church group to a tour of the East Coast, New York, Philadelphia, and so forth. And the thought occurred to me, you know, this great big wonderful world. Our people in Danville should have an opportunity to travel and see this great big wonderful world. So, the first tour I organized was to Williamsburg, Washington, D.C., and around in that area, Richmond, Virginia, and so forth. I lost money. I had to pay several hundred dollars out of my pocket for it to mature. But I carried

it through.

BB: Who went on that trip? Was this a group of people from Danville?

Frye: A group of people from Danville and surrounding areas, people generally whom I had known through the church and then other citizens that I knew had an interest. I was always very--shouldn't say this--but I tried to be selective to get the right type of people for the type of tours I wanted to be known for. And those two succeeded, and I decided to work through Greyhound in Louisville. There was a lady in charge of tours and she was just great. I went down and took training under her for what I should do and how I should do. Anything I'm going to get involved with, I'm going to learn a little something. I'm not going to go out, as my husband says, with my hair flying back knowing nothing. I'm going to try to learn a little bit about it, so I took training under Miss Southard in Louisville. All the rest of my tours I organized through her. I think I did not take a tour into South Carolina nor into Michigan, but all the other continental United States I've taken tours to or through. Some of them many more times than just once.

BB: It sounds like you got to know the hands-on of organizing a trip as well as being a participant in it?

Frye: Yes, yes.

BB: That sounds like a teaching role to me, [laughter-Frye] sort of a carry over . . .

Frye: Well, my next door neighbor, they're just darling to us, and he has an aunt who was at Kentucky State when I was a student there. He teases me all the time, "You're just like Aunt Minnie. You want to turn everything into school and teaching." [laughing]

BB: I wanted to ask you about your husband's father. How did he get his medical training to be a physician? Do you know anything about that?

Frye: Back at that time, Bate School, the African American school that was started by Professor John W. Bate who came to Danville from Louisville--he's been written, well, he was on . . . oh, what was that radio program back fifty years ago? *This Is Your Life*. *This Is Your Life*. He went to New York and was on *This Is Your Life*. He was one of the early graduates of Berea College before the Day Law. We had several other teachers in Bate School who had finished Berea before the Day Law forbade integration in the classroom. So Professor Bate had

the eighth grade school to begin with. So, John's father finished the eight grades, and then the Baptist church of the state of Kentucky had a school in Louisville known as Simmons University. It's almost extinct now; it's just a little Bible college. But then it was the university. John's father was a doctor; he had a brother who was a lawyer; he had a brother who was a minister.

BB: So his father went to Simmons?

Frye: His father finished eighth grade in Danville. Simmons took up with first year high school, did four years high school, four years college. So his father finished high school here, finished eighth here, went to Simmons and did high school, then he did his college. Meharry Medical School from Nashville had an extension at Simmons in Louisville, so he took his medical from Meharry through Simmons. Now did that answer your question?

BB: That answered my question.

BB: Your husband's expression about you, about your flying in the wind, what is that again? Tell me what it is.

Frye: You're always jumping out here getting into something with your hair flying back. It means I'm running without thinking.

BB: Okay. Where do you think that comes from?

Frye: I don't have the slightest idea, and I've never asked him.

BB: I want to ask you one other thing and then we'll stop for now. Did you ever see the movie *Birth of a Nation*?

Frye: No. I've heard a lot about it. Have you seen it?

BB: Years ago. And I just learned that the man who made it, D.W. Griffith . . .

Frye: Of Louisville.

BB: From Louisville, right. I know that when it was showed in Kentucky that there were people who protested the fact that it was being shown and they took it off.

Frye: Yes, throughout history it has been negatively--I can't say negatively received cause I don't know how long it played--but from the African American community, it was always rejected.

BB: Right. But you've never seen it?

Frye: No, and I have never sought it. I might try to do that. That stimulates my

curiosity. I might see if one of the video places could get a copy of it.

BB: Was there any Klan activity in Danville that you were aware of?

Frye: Now my husband could tell you more about that than I could. Incidentally, he and I guess it was 19 and 92. We did a recording and it's supposed to be down in the archives.

BB: In the archives where?

Frye: In Frankfort.

BB: In Frankfort. At the Historical Society?

Frye: It's supposed to be. I don't know whether it is or not. The young lady who was on the Centennial Committee for Boyle County interviewed us, and she said that they were going to put copies of it in the archives. I don't know whether . . .

BB: What was the nature of the interview?

Frye: It was on what life was like for an African American.

BB: What is your husband's name?

Frye: Name? John Goodwin Frye, F-r-y-e.

BB: Okay, and do you have a middle name?

Frye: No, Helen Fisher Frye.

BB: Okay. I stopped you. I'm sorry. You were talking about whether you recalled any Klan activity in the Danville area. You said your husband could talk more about that, but what do you know? What have you heard?

Frye: I heard him say that there was, and I can't tell it correctly, but there was an occasion up at the courthouse when they had planned to hang an African American. The African American community got together and somehow or another they had a cannon and they mounted it someplace. But now I know I'm not telling it all correctly. Anyway, the hanging was called off. But that's the only thing I know. Now, in recent fifty-sixty years there have been rumors of Klan activity. I was on the program up at the Presbyterian church about two or three months ago, and one thing that the NAACP president said that there is an African American racehorse owner who has moved into one of the elite areas of Boyle County, and that he had found writings in his mailbox from the Ku Klux Klan. Now that's supposed to have happened in the last year. And that's all I've heard. One thing so far, the Danville government and the law enforcement officers,

if they get on to anything, they will squelch it as quickly and quietly as possible. I think that's one of the things that has made Danville one of the best communities. In a lot of communities and counties, now I'm not saying we don't have some corrupt county officials, but generally that is their image. They have the image of being corrupt, but so far as I know there's a little bit of money under the table but by and large down in Boyle County if they hear of anything going, they'll keep it quiet and squelch it.

BB: Who other than your mother have been your role models in life? Who have you looked to either that you knew personally, or you read about, or knew about who were important to you?

Frye: Before I started to school as a little girl -- I guess I was a dreamer --and I said I wanted to be a seamstress or a teacher or a missionary. I guess I got the seamstress idea from my mother because she sewed. [laughing] We called her sewing mammy-made clothes, but she sewed for nine children. She made everything. And so I decided I wanted to sew. And when I was in the second grade, she bought me some material at the ten cent store and let me make a dress and wear it to school in second grade. So I always wanted to sew. My church work caused me to want to be a missionary, and our church often brought in foreign missionaries. They impressed me and, of course, at that time, I don't know from whom I might have been inspired to want to be a teacher. Before going to school, I hadn't had that much contact with them. Again, I give my mother credit for everything; my father was there and he wanted us to do the right thing. Don't come up with any foolishness cause he would straighten you out. But I guess it was the old school: the woman ran the children and the father was the breadwinner.

BB: As you grew up though, were there teachers that you had or people that influenced you ?

Frye: Well, I had an eighth-grade teacher that I felt knew the sun, moon, and skies. But I feel my mold was already cast before then, so I don't feel that any of them did anything more for me than my home did. But I was impressed with her; she was a brilliant person. Then I had a high-school English teacher who was more a friend and a chum. We still are friendly. She lives in Washington. We visit her. Her husband is manager of a hospital there in Washington. But

she showed me how warm and friendly and human that teachers could be, but yet she was outstanding. She stood out as an individual.

BB: And what's her name?

Frye: Her name was Viola Smith Baker and her husband was from Louisville. And they moved to Washington. They had three sons. One's at Indiana University, one's at Penn State, and I've forgotten where the other one is—but they all were outstanding. I attended a national Sunday school convention once out in Denver, and one of the speakers was from Morehouse College. Now, if ever I got an outside influence, I think that was this speaker. He left with me the philosophy, the belief that a Christian should be involved in all aspects of human life. You shouldn't just be praying on Sunday and living piously, but a Christian has a place in politics. A Christian has a place in social action. I guess that is the biggest outside influence I had.

BB: Have you been active in party politics?

Frye: No. No, not much in me for politics. I'm too rigid. [laughter]

BB: But you have a political party?

Frye: Yes, I'm registered Democrat. When I first came out of school, and during civil rights days, each party was trying to prove and solicit African American votes. The Republican committee here in Danville asked me would I serve on their committee. The Democrats in Danville asked me to serve on their committee. So you know I wouldn't have supported either one of them because each thought I guess they could use me. But I have supported a lot of the candidates. Just like I said, Joe Clarke came to President Spragens of Centre College—we're good friends. He ran for city councilman. He came to me and asked me to support him, put letters in the paper and so forth. Whatever my conviction leads me to do, I will do.

BB: Did you ever think about running for office yourself?

Frye: No, no. I could not win. Now, I have been voted into many, many positions. For instance, the Human Relations Council and when the Danville government first organized the Danville-Boyle County Human Rights Commission, I was president. I've been placed in a lot of positions, but I don't think I could win a public vote.

BB: Why do you say that?

Frye: I'm too rigid. I'm not flexible enough. People love me, but they don't like me. I

know there are a lot of people who don't like me. They'll tell me that. They tell me I'm too hard and firm. I don't yield enough.

BB: Because you have opinions?

Frye: Yes, I stick with my conviction. I do not—you just can't change me. I paid a price for it, but I'd rather have lived and believed as I have than to have been blown with the wind.

BB: Right.

Frye: And a lot of the students that I have taught, those who have succeeded and done well, many of them will come to me and give me credit. I was at a meeting at Shakertown two months or three months ago and the speaker was speaking on Prichard. I didn't know that the president of the Boyle County Bank, the Farmer's Bank here in Danville was the son of Mr. Prichard. I taught him and I had heard bits and snippets about Mr. Prichard. And the reason I went to that meeting, because in his later life the contributions he made to education nobody can deny. His earlier political life I didn't know much about and the speaker was from North Carolina.

BB: He's probably the one who just wrote the new biography on Ed Prichard..

Frye: Right. He was speaking and a book review editor of the *Lexington Herald* was going to be there to comment. I knew he and his family are Danvillians so I just decided I was going. But when I got there, the speaker had roots in Danville and I had taught one of his cousins. Someone had met him—he is an aviator with one of the big airlines—and a Negro Danvillian had met him on the airplane and this aviator asked this person did they know me. They were telling how impressed they were when I was their teacher. So, I'm saying that to say a lot of the people who have succeeded appreciate what I tried to do for them, but a lot of these who have failed and done nothing, they blame me. She was too mean, she was too hard. That's the word they use; I was too hard.

BB: It sounds to me that you're still pretty active.

Frye: [laughing] You know, I have two papers in there that I read last night. Well, I've had three critical illnesses in the last six to nine months. One of them was about four or five weeks ago. I had pneumonia or pleurisy and a terrible fever so that I was calling people all over

Danville that I don't even know. I was just totally out of it. So, I realize now that I'm going to have to stop. In the meantime, my mail piled up, and I just read one day this week a letter that came during that time where they were asking me to come to a meeting from Danville and Boyle County. They're one of five, what, gold star cities? They have so many millions of dollars to spend, and they wanted me to work on their committee. The committee was reporting, and here I'm just now getting the letter. But my point is—they're still reaching out for me because I don't have brain enough to say no.

BB: But I think you must like to stay active as much as you do.

Frye: I do. I want to see things improve. The younger people—since they've gotten the jobs and the factories and are making the big salaries and they're buying the big homes in subdivisions where fifty years ago their parents couldn't have bought them. They're interested in the materialistic side and the monetary side and they're not concerned. . . . You know, there was a social side to my life. I loved people; I loved to entertain. On the other hand, I was pretty selective with whom I did and what I did. But the young people today—I mean, we wanted—our foreparents had worked in the homes of the rich and the plantation owners and the big owners and so what they learned and what they got they used and practiced. I mean, they had silver that was handed down from the wife, and what they didn't have, they made. They entertained the way they had entertained—these young people will give you a paper plate and say, "This is it." The young African Americans in Danville aren't concerned about the cultural side. That's what bothers me.

BB: Now, you were on the Kentucky African American Commission. Tell me about that. When was that?

Frye: I was—my term expired about three or four months ago. That was a commission that was organized to identify, authenticate, and try to restore as many African American monuments and buildings and structures because most of them are gone. Urban renewal destroyed most of the monuments that were build by our foreparents. Now, here in Danville, and this is away from what you want to hear. . . .

BB: No, that's okay.

Frye: Here in Danville, as I grew up as a child—now John's father owned a two-story

brick building with his office on the second floor and a business on the first floor. There were about four large, l-a-r-g-e, large l-o-d-g-e halls, lovely structures, comparable to anything on Main Street. Of course, most of them on Main Street are three-story and these were two-story but gorgeous buildings. After the Depression, they did not have the money to maintain them, and they came to a degree of deterioration, but urban renewal wiped out everything that we had. That's what this African American Heritage Commission is trying to do, identify those that are left and help in the restoration of them.

BB: And what was the building that you helped to save?

Frye: There's a 150-year-old-plus house that was built by an indentured slave and it had been occupied by only two families, the builder-owner and one other family. We acquired it and have restored it to some degree; it's not up to where it should be. I would like for you to see it sometime.

BB: It's here in Danville?

Frye: Uh hmm.

BB: Well, I'd like to. And I'm going to stop our interview here.

END OF INTERVIEW